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SUBJECT: ARGENTINA: POLLING THE POLLSTERS

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Classified By: Ambassador Lino Gutierrez for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Poloff recently met with several of the leading Argentine pollsters to discuss their views on the image of the United States, public support for Kirchner, and the current political situation in Argentina. Included in these meetings were Graciela Romer, Manuel Mora y Araujo, Marita Carballo, Enrique Puceiro, Hugo Haime, and Analia del Franco. The polling experts ascribed the comparatively negative public opinion of the United States to past history and current policy disagreements, but argue the views are more a knee-jerk reaction than a deep-seated dislike of America and Americans. Kirchner's approval ratings vary from pollster to pollster, but all agree he has lost a significant level of support over the past year. They view the political situation as being in flux, with a divided opposition and a ruling Peronist Party (PJ) that has become more of a culture than a party. Some pollsters see the traditional party system eventually being replaced by new center-left and center-right coalitions. End Summary.

Public Opinion of United States Multifaceted

¶2. (C) All of the pollsters attributed the poor image of the United States in Argentina to historical trends, a reaction to the policies of former President Carlos Menem, and disagreement with current US policy. However, they feel these negative views do not translate into a rejection of US values or anger towards Americans. They discussed at length with Poloff the reason the recent Latinbarometer poll found that only three in ten Argentines had a positive view of the United States, well below the regional average. The pollsters pointed to Argentina's past trend of competing with the United States for regional leadership, the lack of knowledge of the U.S. in a country traditionally focused on relations with Europe, an association in the public's mind between the U.S. and the IMF's role in the 2001-2002 economic crisis, and a reaction to the "carnal relations" between the two countries associated with the now widely disliked Menem administration. They argued that disagreements with current US policies in areas such as Iraq are also a source of negative feelings toward the United States, but are not as important as historical factors. It is interesting to note that positive views of the U.S. only dropped eight points--38 percent to 30 percent--between the 2002 Latinbarometer, completed before the Iraq war, and the 2003 Latinbarometer, taken after the war began. However, the number of Argentines saying they had a good opinion of America dropped from 53 percent just before the crisis in 2001 to 38 percent the following year, showing the impact of the economic crisis on the Argentine image of the U.S.. Marita Carballo of TNS-Gallup mentioned that throughout the economic crisis, her polls showed that Argentines blamed their own government primarily for the crisis, although the IMF and the U.S. were viewed as contributing agents.

¶3. (C) When asked how to improve opinion of the U.S., all of the pollsters recommended an increase in exchanges, particularly at the non-governmental level, involving both countries' academic, scientific, business, and cultural communities. The opinion experts felt that increasing the frequency of these exchanges, and the publicity they generate, would help break down the wall of ignorance that exists about the United States and demonstrate the positive aspects of the bilateral relationship. Graciela Romer recommended a program to teach the best practices from the US Congress to assist the Argentine Congress in its current efforts to be more transparent. The pollsters generally complimented the Embassy's efforts to build a stronger relationship between the two countries and felt these efforts would be reflected in improved polling numbers for the U.S. over time.

Kirchner's Approval Rating Depends on the Question

¶4. (C) President Nestor Kirchner's support level varies

widely among the pollsters, depending on how they ask the question, but most have Kirchner's approval ratings between 50 and 58 percent. Kirchner tends to poll at least ten points higher on his personal image than on his performance as president. Kirchner also does better when the question is asked as a two-option, approve or disapprove question, than he does if the question is asked with a more standard four-point or five-point scale. For example, Puceiro's latest polling shows that 58 percent of Argentines think Kirchner is doing a good or very good job as president, with 33 percent saying he is doing an average job. However, when asked whether respondents approve or disapprove of Kirchner's job performance, without the option of a middle category, 78 percent said they approved. Graciela Romer had Kirchner's positive personal image at 55 percent, with 28 percent giving him an average personal rating. For job performance, Romer's polling came in lower than the other pollsters, with 42 percent saying Kirchner was doing a good job and 35 percent giving him an average rating. Kirchner has higher ratings on his performance with the economy and foreign relations than he does with controlling crime and dealing with the piqueteros. The pollsters lamented how their polls are frequently misquoted in the press, causing a great deal of confusion on Kirchner's actual approval rating. Both Enrique Zuleta Puceiro and Analia del Franco vehemently denied the allegations made in the 21 August Noticias article that accused them of biasing their polling in favor of Kirchner. They argued the numbers used in the Noticias article were either wrong, or taken out of context. (See Reftel)

15. (C) The pollsters explained Kirchner's comparatively high approval rating as being a result of an improving economy, a favorable comparison with past presidents, a lack of viable alternatives, and the fact that he is seen as an individual seeking to change the system. As Mora y Araujo put it, Kirchner is viewed by many as the man on the white horse in western movies that rides into town to take over for the corrupt and incompetent men that have been mismanaging things. Kirchner's biggest challenges are the economy and crime and security issues. Most of the polling experts were optimistic in the short term on the economy, although they generally attributed the economic improvements to a more favorable international situation than to Kirchner's decision making. On crime and security, they felt the GOA lacked a clear strategy and was more focused on short-term strategies, rather than long-term needs, such as the complete overhaul of the Buenos Aires provincial police force. Puceiro felt that Kirchner's support level would likely drop in the coming year because he would be forced to accept the PJ presidency in order to get the support from the PJ provincial party structure to make the gains he wants in the 2005 elections. By finally tying himself to the traditional Peronist structure, he will do permanent damage to his image as an outsider trying to clean up the system. Most of the other pollsters agreed that Kirchner's approval ratings would continue to erode over the coming year, although they all felt there currently was no opposition leader on the horizon that could challenge Kirchner's top spot in the arena of public opinion. Minister of the Economy Roberto Lavagna is the individual with the next highest approval rate, with 49 percent of the population approving of the job he is doing in Puceiro's latest poll.

A Political System in Transition

16. (C) The pollsters described the political opposition as being in disarray, with some seeing an eventual end to the traditional party structure in Argentina. All of the opinion analysts felt there currently is no well-organized political opposition outside of the PJ party. Opposition figures like ARI leader Elisa Carrio, Recrear leader Ricardo Lopez Murphy, and Compromise for Change leader Mauricio Macri are merely figures without a national party structure, nor enough national appeal to directly challenge Kirchner. The Radical Civil Union (UCR) party has a national party structure, but is too weak and divided to act as a real check on the GOA. Some pollsters, such as Graciela Romer, felt the PJ and UCR no longer represent the Argentine electorate. For Romer, these traditional parties have become fractured, loose groupings that encompass individuals from mutually exclusive political points of view. As Rosendo Fraga recently put it in a meeting with DCM and POLCOUNS, the PJ has become more of a culture than a political party. The UCR has faced the brunt of these political changes over the past few years, as leading members of the party have left to form their own political organizations. Romer felt the eventual fracturing of the PJ was also inevitable. What she thought would replace the current political structure is a center-right and a center-left coalition. (Comment: Dr. Ruben Octavio Villan, who works with Mauricio Macri, recently gave Poloffs a similar prediction. He felt what has happened in the Buenos Aires city politics, with leaders breaking off of the

UCR and PJ to form their own political organizations, is a foreshadowing of what will eventually happen on a national stage. It must be noted that none of our contacts, nor the Embassy, feel this scenario is likely to happen anytime in the near future. End Comment) The pollsters felt the main obstacles that impeded the formation of new opposition grouping are the egos of the opposition leaders, the negative association Argentines have with political alliances following the disastrous experience with former President de la Rua's coalition government, and Kirchner's high approval ratings. Puceiro felt it was also impossible for leftist parties to develop because there was little political space between Kirchner and the piqueteros, who have high negatives among the public.

Comment

17. (C) Argentina has a well developed polling community, with several firms associated with major international research groups, such as TNS and Research International. The pollsters are also excellent analysts of the Argentine political system and have proved to be an invaluable source of political reporting for the Embassy. All of them are doing work for one or more political parties or figures, giving them access to interesting information on political strategy and negotiations. We will continue to maintain close contact with them as we look toward the 2005 election.
GUTIERREZ